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ABSTRACT

The "countercommencement" address (sometimes composed in reaction to the traditional commencement address) may be usefully criticized as an example of the rhetorical genre known as the "secular jeremiad." This provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the motives and meanings of such an address, which is typically offensive in tone and content, as well as a further application of genre criticism itself. A secular jeremiad replaces the tenets of Puritan religion found in the traditional jeremiad with what can be described as the "civil religion of the American Dream." Secular jeremiads incorporate such values as effort, persistence, initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and material success. Three countercommencement addresses (two published in the "Chronicle of Higher Education" and one reprinted in the "National Review") typical of the genre are analyzed in this paper, which ends with an evaluation that concludes that these addresses are probably ineffective as rhetorical acts because they fail to incorporate a critical element of the jeremiad, the effort to "fetch good out of evil"; that they lack the element of optimism. Countercommencements are rituals, a way for rhetors to repent their own sins, instead of doing what would seem more appropriate in the face of calamity--reforming their own behavior and eliminating the problem. (Thirty footnotes are included.) (RS)

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RHETORICAL GENRE:

THE COUNTERCOMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AS JEREMIAD

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RHETORICAL GENRE: THE COUNTERCOMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AS JEREMIAD

(Abstract)

The commencement address is a familiar component of college and university graduation ceremonies. Less familiar but perhaps more interesting is the "countercommencement" address which is sometimes composed in reaction to the traditional commencement address. It differs from the traditional address in a number of ways, but principally in its intent: To blame graduates rather than to praise them.

This paper asserts that the countercommencement address may be usefully criticized as an example of the rhetorical genre known as the secular jeremiad. This provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the motives and meanings of such an address, which is typically quite offensive in tone and content, as well as a further application of genre criticism itself. Not incidentally, it also provides insight to a rhetorical situation which is rather unique to academia, and so may be of particular concern to college and university faculty members.

The paper begins with an overview of the genre approach to criticism and the jeremiad as a generic form. It then analyzes three countercommencement addresses which have appeared over the past ten years. It ends with an evaluation of the addresses, concluding that because they fail to incorporate a critical element of the jeremiad, the effort to "fetch good out of evil", they are probably ineffective as rhetorical acts. This raises the question of whether they serve any real purpose.

Among the "rites of spring" at colleges and universities are commencement, and the commencement address. As befits a largely celebratory occasion, commencement addresses are typically inspirational in tone and full of bright visions for the future. Indeed, regardless of where or by whom they are delivered, they often display strong similarities (some would say a dulling sameness!) in theme: Congratulating the graduates on their achievements, assuring them that the world is waiting for their talents, challenging them to use their talents for societal as well as personal gain, and reminding them that commencement marks the beginning, not the end, of a wonderful chapter in their lives.

Less familiar but perhaps more interesting is another address which is sometimes composed in reaction to the commencement address -- the dissenting or "countercommencement" address. In contrast to the traditional address, these addresses are seldom if ever intended to be actually delivered; they are, in fact, speeches published as essays, reflecting what their authors would like to say to graduates if the commencement occasion would permit and probably if they had the nerve. Most are written by college faculty members, but at times they have also attracted the efforts of such notable figures as the novelist John Steinbeck[1] and the humorist Russell Baker.[2] Some, like Baker's and one by William Zinsser[3], are satirical pieces which poke fun at the usual platitudes in commencement addresses. Others, however, have a far more serious and less pleasurable aim: To blame graduates rather than to praise them.

This paper contends that the countercommencement address may be usefully criticized as an example of the rhetorical genre known as the secular jeremiad. This provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the motives

and meanings of the address, as well as a further application of genre criticism itself. Not incidentally, it also provides insight to a rhetorical context which is rather unique to academia, and so may be of particular concern to college and university faculty members.

The paper begins with an overview of the genre approach to criticism and the jeremiad as a generic form. It then analyzes three counter-commencement addresses which have appeared over the past ten years. It concludes with an evaluation of the likely effectiveness of the addresses, rhetorically and educationally.

Genre Criticism and the Jeremiad

As Fisher[4] has observed, a genre is a category of speeches inductively derived from examinations of actual discourse. "Isolation of genres," writes Jamieson, "implies that significantly similar characteristics inhere in works of the same type regardless of author and period of production."[5] A genre of rhetoric, she continues, contains "specimens of rhetoric" (i.e., speeches or parts of speeches) which share characteristics distinguishing them from specimens of other rhetorical genres.

The roots of rhetorical genres are historically traced to Aristotle's classification of rhetoric as deliberative, forensic, or epideictic. Other, more elaborate classifications have followed, but the modern justification for any of them is found in four key assumptions posited some twenty years ago by Edwin Black:[6] (1) There are a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can be found; (2) There are a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can respond to a situation; (3) A situation calls discourse into existence, and comparable situations prompt comparable

responses; (4) The recurrence of a situational type throughout history will provide a critic with information on rhetorical responses that are available in that situation.

The concept of genre, then, is a way of acknowledging the interdependence of purpose, lines of argument, stylistic choices, and requirements arising from the situation and the audience. Genres are "dynamic fusions" of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements that are strategic responses to the demands of the situation and the purposes of the rhetor.[7] They presume that there are constants in human action that are reflected in recurring rhetorical forms, and for the rhetorical critic, they identify the conventions and affinities that one rhetorical discourse shares with another.[8]

This is a controversial view, for it seems to deny the traditional proposition that speeches are unique entities specifically created for specific occasions, which in a sense, of course, they are. There is always the danger that focusing on the similarities among speeches will blind one to the differences among them, that generic classifications may become prescriptive rather than descriptive, or that they may "proliferate into tiresome and useless taxonomies."[9]

Yet as Andrews points out, rhetorical events are part of a process; they are influenced by and can influence other events.[10] A speech does not occur in a vacuum, but in a context that can be shaped and directed by circumstances that have preceded it. They may circumscribe the limits of rhetorical options, for example, or mold audience expectations.[11] Thus, if rhetorical genres are applied sensitively, with an eye to both the common and the idiosyncratic in discourse, they can be a valuable

critical tool. "Understanding generic features," says Andrews, "may lead the critic to a fuller comprehension of what an audience expects in certain situations, and may lead to the formulation of a set of criteria whereby the critic can determine how well any speaker has met those expectations."[12] In short, genre criticism may help to explain what any critical method hopes to explain: How rhetoric achieves its ends.

One prominent rhetorical genre is the jeremiad, a dictionary definition of which is "a lamentation or tale of woe," in reference to the Lamentations of Jeremiah from the Old Testament of the Bible. Johannesen claims that in its earliest American form, the Puritan Jeremiad of the late 1600s and 1700s, the jeremiad was "a 'political sermon' delivered on ritual-communal occasions and it intertwined practical spiritual guidance on matters of religion and public affairs."[13] It coupled progress of the Kingdom of God with the progress of the American Nation, and a key assumption was that the Puritans, as God's "chosen people," had a unique mission and destiny.

The jeremiad typically began, Johannesen notes, with a scriptural passage, an Old Testament quote from one of the prophets such as Jeremiah or Isaiah, that should serve as a "communal norm". Then, it consisted of four parts or components:

(1) Condemnation of the people for failure to keep their covenant with God. The rhetor (preacher) would chastize the listeners for their sins -- heresy, lying, moral degeneracy, sleeping during sermons, etc.. The blame would often be placed on the weakness of the listeners themselves, but sometimes on the seductive influence of external forces (other groups, individuals, ideas) which had lead the people astray.

(2) Vivid portrayal of how the warnings of the prophets were coming true through evils God was inflicting on the people. In highly figurative language, abounding in metaphor and controlled by a variety of sophisticated rhetorical devices, the rhetor would claim that the listeners' misfortunes (sickness, rebellious children, failed crops, etc.) were punishments from God for turning away from Him and His church. Strong use was often made of Biblical imagery such as light and dark, storms, wall and garden, death and decay.

(3) Exhortation to repair the broken covenant by repenting errors and returning to the true principles of the church. Having illustrated the wages of sin, the rhetor would praise Godly virtues like piety, orderliness, cleanliness, honesty, and industry, and urge the listeners to embrace them.

(4) Predictions that God would fulfill His promise through cessation of punishment and restoration of progress. In conclusion, the rhetor would provide assurance of pardon; assurance that despite their sins the listeners were still God's chosen people, and that they could still achieve their manifest destiny through heartfelt repentance.

It may be seen from this outline that the jeremiad was more than a tale of woe. Though heavy with fire and brimstone, it went beyond a solely negative tone or function. "It intertwined lamentations of sins and decay with firm optimism, with affirmation of redemption, promise, and progress. Jeremiads often demanded reform from within of societal problems; their aim was correction more than simply destruction."[14] They typically aimed, in Bormann's phrase,[15] to "fetch good out of evil" by stressing ways in which calamities, especially unexpected ones which

might shake the people's faith in God's beneficence, provided opportunities for rededication and renewal. In this, it might be noted, they fit well within the Burkean concept of rhetorical acts as social drama, utilizing human motives of guilt, purification, and redemption to create identification among listeners and promote cooperation.[16]

Around the turn of the century, the Puritan Jeremiad gave way to a variant form which Johannesen terms the Contemporary Secular Jeremiad. The tenents of Puritan religion were replaced by what he describes as a "civil religion of the American Dream", in which the Puritan values of piety, orderliness, self-sacrifice, etc. were replaced by such values as effort, persistence, initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and material success.[17]

A useful treatment of this form is contained in Carpenter's analysis of the "historical jeremiad", which he defines as "a secular treatise which accomplishes its goals rhetorically by a process leading readers to view themselves as a chosen people confronted with a timely if not urgent warning that unless a certain course of atoning action is followed, dire consequences will ensue."[18] Like the Puritan Jeremiad, the historical jeremiad contains essentially four components:

(1) Creation of a sense of emergency and impending doom. Often included in the introduction, the rhetor identifies some epochal and ominous event or movement that should call an audience to alarm. In one of the sources discussed by Carpenter, American historian Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", the emergency comes in the opening sentence with a reference to an 1890 U.S. Census Bulletin which concludes that, for the first time,

the country is so thoroughly populated that "there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" -- with all of the problems that may imply.

(2) Perception of the audience as a chosen people confronted with doom unless atoning action is taken. The rhetor creates, in Carpenter's words, "an anticipatory sense of a relevant destiny" which stands in jeopardy. In Turner's essay, this is done by referring to the desirable human traits engendered by the frontier mentality (e.g., individualism, self-reliance, enthusiasm, and a spirit of adventure) which may be lost with the vanishing frontier and threaten the continued success of the audience as a great people.

(3) Provision of a means by which the audience can insure its continued well-being and ultimate salvation. The rhetor proposes, explicitly or implicitly, a course of action, a policy, a set of behaviors, or often, a moral lesson to be learned. In Turner's case, the lamented endangerment of frontier traits is coupled with a call to preserve those traits in the present and the future, to apply the old spirit to modern life. Significantly, as Carpenter mentions, the rhetor creates in the mind of the audience a "Second Persona" -- an auditor implied by the discourse who is a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor be.[19] The aim is to make the audience desire to participate in the rhetor's dramatic vision, to become "the people" described in the discourse.

(4) A final indication of the urgency of the situation and the need to take action. In conclusion, the rhetor restates the problem and solution. Turner, for example, reminds his readers that without vigilance the source of their greatness, the American Frontier, might "never again" be able to exert its influence. He compares the importance of the frontier

to America with the importance of the Mediterranean Sea to the early Greeks; offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities which shaped their destiny.

Except for the absence of a theological premise, of course, these points ("lines of argument") are similar to those in the Puritan Jeremiad. By combining the two versions, then, it is possible to summarize the salient features of the jeremiad as a rhetorical genre.

First and most obvious, perhaps, is the rhetor's role as a "calamity howler", as Johannesen puts it, prophesying gloom, doom, and distress. This is not done as an end in itself, however, but as a means of calling people back to their "duty". Again, the aim of the jeremiad is correction more than destruction. The rhetor's intent is to sound a warning, chastizing people for their failings and pointing to actual or potential examples of disaster, hoping thereby to arouse in people a necessary sense of concern, contrition, and quite possibly guilt.

Second is the perception of the audience's role as that of a "chosen people", ordained by God or fate to achieve some special mission. This makes the call to duty more urgent, for from "great" people, "great" things should be expected. It also makes the prospect of disaster more worrisome, for whether by their own actions or those of others, it seems to deny the people what is "rightfully" theirs.

Third is the suggestion of ways through which the audience can avoid or remove disaster, typically by atoning or purifying actions such as the admission of faults, the paying of penance, and the acceptance of "truths" which have too long been ignored. The recommended action may or may not be stated directly (it is often presented imaginatively, through an idealized

second persona), but as Johannesen states in reference to the secular "American Dream" jeremiad, the basic message is quite clear: "Current problems will be solved and America still can achieve its destiny of greatness if only citizens will repent and return to the values, principles, and traditions that made them a 'chosen people'."[20]

Fourth, finally, and most importantly, is the offering of hope. The tone of the jeremiad is ultimately optimistic rather than pessimistic, promising redemption as a reward for suffering, progress as a prize for reform. Again, the intent of the jeremiad is often to fetch good from evil, treating adversity as a chance for growth. This is probably mandated by the nature of the situation and the relationship that exists between the rhetor and the audience. A jeremiad, after all, is an awkward address to give! For a preacher, for example, the mere presence of the sin he decries could be taken as evidence that he is not doing his job, that the calamities of the people are, in fact, his fault not theirs! Without hope, the guilt of the people aroused by the rhetor's condemnations might turn to anger at their source, and a strong desire to (figuratively or literally) "kill the messenger".

The Countercommencement Address

We come now to the matter of how well the features of the jeremiad can be used to interpret the features of the countercommencement address. As mentioned earlier, the countercommencement address differs from the traditional commencement address primarily in its intent to blame the graduates rather than to praise them. While the tone of the traditional address is largely positive, the tone of the counteraddress is not.

This is amply demonstrated in what could be a "model" of the countercommencement address, Carter A. Daniel's "Notes for a Dissenting Commencement Address" which appeared in the May 7, 1979, issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education.[21] As its title indicates, the address is written not as a manuscript but as if it was an actual set of speaker's notes, in outline form and fragmentary style. It is abstracted below, using Daniel's own words as much as possible.

Introduction

Around country this week, two or three thousand ceremonies just like this one. Speakers usually make five points: today you receive deserved reward for hard labors; gratitude is due college for bestowing wisdom on you; confident you will successfully travel life's rocky path; world desperately needs your abilities; today marks start of great and wonderful era for you.

Some truth in each of these; no wish to belittle. Believe, however, still more truth found in five opposite statements.

Thesis

* You've finished the easy part; anybody can get a college degree.
* Era starting today is less interesting, less fun, much harder.
* World is filled with people who couldn't make transition.
* What you've done in past four years has little relation to what follows.
* Colleges have failed to prepare you for the next 50 years.

Point One

Doubtless college seemed hard -- papers, problems, exams, labs -- but three things make me call it easy:

Freedom -- Despite pressures of college work, you've had freedoms you'll never have again. Freedom of daily schedules -- no more naps, tennis, TV -- henceforth daylight hours will be spent indoors. Freedom of holidays -- no more half-week Thanksgivings, two-week Christmases, summer off. Freedom of choice -- you've chosen courses, instructors, schedules, even colleges. Starting now freedom is sacrificed to will of the corporation.

Temporariness -- College is like Monopoly game -- fold up board and forget about bankruptcies and shattered hopes. In college, repeat a course if fail;

do poorly on exam and shrug it off; cut class if oversleep; get note from doctor and be excused from anything; flunk out of college and go somewhere else. Henceforth, no new starts -- everything cumulative -- every mistake stays on your record -- no doctor's excuses accepted.

Guarantees -- In college, you're guaranteed attention, supervision, caring. For four years, somebody has read your papers, listened to your comments, answered your questions, whether or not you deserved it. Professors had to pay attention to you; after today, nobody has to. Big shock to discover nobody notices, nobody listens, nobody cares.

Point Two

Transition you make today is from something easy, interesting, and fun to something less fun, less interesting, much harder. Less fun because less varied -- not four or five different subjects, but one. Less interesting because less challenging -- instead of intricate puzzles to solve or profound questions to wrestle with, life presents endless series of routine tasks. Much harder because as noted before, game is over; this time it counts.

Thus wrong to say, "Today is dawn of great era." Today is end of freedom, beginning of hard work. Hope you've had fun past four years; may very well end today.

Point Three

Some people never manage the transition. Some try and fail -- many promising students never do much after college. Others try to hold off transition -- hang around campus, pretend they're still part of college scene. Point applies even, alas, to professors -- no particular qualifications for their work, not even much interest in it, but do it because they don't want to leave college. Getting out of school when you've never done anything except go to school, is big step. Some people stumble here.

Point Four

What you've been doing for four years has little relation to what you will do next. If social work, will find fellow workers never heard of theories you studied in sociology. If government, nobody will have read Karl Marx. If business, nobody will care about consumer motivation theory in your books. True, nobody ever promised you practical application for set theory, literary criticism, or history of science, but don't expect to make much use of what you've learned here.

Point Five, Including Summary

College has failed you three ways: promising, spoiling, depriving.

Promising -- No matter what anybody has promised you, no automatic jobs, money, ease, respect, leadership role, etc., will start tomorrow.

Spoiling -- College has spoiled you by reading papers that don't deserve to be read, listening to comments that don't deserve a hearing, paying attention even to the lazy, ill-informed, and rude. We had to do it, for the sake of education; but nobody will ever do it again.

Depriving -- To sum it all up -- college has deprived you of adequate preparation for next 50 years. It has failed you by being easy; free; forgiving; attentive; comfortable; interesting; challenging; fun.

Good luck, tomorrow.

Clearly, the rhetor's role as "calamity howler" is apparent here. The address is filled with prophecies of doom, and the list of disasters ahead is long and detailed. The readers' "sins" are explicated, and there is a strong tone of chastizement in the address. The audience's role as a "chosen people" is not made explicit, but it may be there implicity in the fact that, as college graduates, the audience members enjoy a "favored status" and seem destined to achieve (in their own minds, certainly) great things. The rhetor's claim that they probably will not achieve their dreams is therefore likely to be more attention-getting, and much more concern-provoking.

What is most strikingly missing from the address is the prospect of redemption in return for repentance. The rhetor does not even ask the readers to repent, leaves them with no ways to atone for their actions and restore their hoped-for progress, it is simply "too late". A second persona appears, perhaps, in the implicit image of the "ideal" student (energetic, hard-working, well-informed, polite, realistic -- all of the

things the readers are not), but the readers are given no hope of ever becoming that "person". Thus, the address is largely negative in outlook, imbued with a fundamental pessimism, even fatalism, which is best expressed in its final line: "Good luck, tomorrow."

A sense of fatalism is even more obvious in a second address, Jacob Neusner's "Commencement Address", which is brief enough to quote in its entirety. The address originally appeared in the Daily Herald of Brown University, where Neusner is a professor of religious studies, and was subsequently reprinted elsewhere.[22] The copy below comes from the National Review of June 12, 1981.[23]

We the faculty take no pride in our educational achievements with you. We have prepared you for a world that does not exist, indeed, that cannot exist. You have spent four years supposing that failure leaves no record. You have learned at Brown that when your work goes poorly, the painless solution is to drop out. But starting now, in the world to which you go, failure marks you. Confronting difficulty by quitting leaves you changed. Outside Brown, quitters are no heroes.

With us you could argue about why your errors were not errors, why mediocre work really was excellent, why you could take pride in routine and slipshod presentation. Most of you, after all, can look back on honor grades for most of what you have done. So, here grades can have meant little in distinguishing the excellent from the ordinary. But tomorrow, in the world to which you go, you had best not defend errors but learn from them. You will be ill-advised to demand praise for what does not deserve it and abuse those who do not give it.

For four years we created an altogether forgiving world, in which whatever slight effort you gave was all that was demanded. When you did not keep appointments, we made new ones. When your work came in beyond the deadline, we pretended not to care.

Worse still, when you were boring, we acted as if you were saying something important. When you were garrulous and talked to hear yourself talk, we listened as if it mattered. When you tossed on our desks writing upon which you had not labored, we read it and even responded, as though you had earned a response. When you were dull, we pretended you were smart. When you were predictable, unimaginative, and routine, we listened as if to new and wonderful things. When you demanded free lunch, we served it. And all this why?

Despite your fantasies, it was not even that we wanted to be liked by you. It was that we did not want to be bothered, and the easy way out was pretense: smiles and easy Bs.

It is conventional to quote in addresses such as these. Let me quote someone you've never heard of, Professor Carter A. Daniel, Rutgers University (Chronicle of Higher Education, May 7, 1979):

> College has spoiled you by reading papers that don't deserve to be read, listening to comments that don't deserve a hearing, paying attention even to the lazy, ill-informed, and rude. We had to do it, for the sake of education. But nobody will ever do it again. College has deprived you of adequate preparation for the next fifty years. It has failed you by being easy, free, forgiving, attentive, interesting, unchallenging fun. Good luck tomorrow.

That is why, on this commencement day, we have nothing in which to take much pride.

Oh yes, there is one more thing. Try not to act toward your coworkers and bosses as you have acted toward us. I mean, when they do not give you what you want but have not earned, don't abuse them, insult them, act out with them your parlous relationships with your parents. This too we have tolerated. It was, as I said, not to be liked. Few professors actually care whether or not they are liked by peer-paralyzed adolescents, fools so shallow as to imagine professors care not about education but about popularity. It was, again, to be rid of you. So go, unlearn the lies we taught you. To Life!

Neusner's work is of course influenced by Daniel's, not only in the quotation from Daniel it includes but in the use of parallel lines of argument (e.g., college has been easy and forgiving, but in the world outside, things will be different). The rhetor's howling of calamity is, if anything, more strident, and the predictions of doom more pointed. The characterization of the readers as "chosen people" is again implicit, but perhaps even more likely to be recognized by the readers, since Brown University is an elite, Ivy-League school which might be expected to attract the best and the brightest. The most significant feature of the address may be that the omission of the prospect of redemption is even more

disheartening for the readers: Not only is it too late for pardon, but "we, the faculty," wish to be rid of you! The placing of blame upon the readers for their impending doom is more complete than in Daniel's address (where part of the blame is assumed by the colleges for failing the students), and thus, the creation of guilt is more intensive. Indeed, Neusner seems to take the rhetor's role as a prophet of doom to its logical extreme -- disaster will come, it cannot be avoided, there is nothing ahead but a rude awakening. In this respect, his final words, "To Life!", have a particularly ironic ring.

Reviewing these addresses, the points of similarity to the jeremiad form are hopefully clear, as are the points of difference. In a way, the countercommencement address might be said to represent a truncated or incomplete jeremiad, most notably missing what is most important in the form, the essential element of optimism. The jeremiad's aim to fetch good out of evil is replaced in these addresses by an apparent aim to fetch evil out of evil, to chastize the people for their sins as an end in itself.

Interestingly, an indication of how easily this aim could be changed is contained in a third address, Leo Ochrymowycz's "Open Letter to the Class of 1987", which appeared in the May 20, 1987, issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education.[24] Ochrymowycz's remarks are similar to Daniel's, making essentially the same points in essentially the same way. What is significant are the last three paragraphs which make up the conclusion:

> But in all fairness, no promises were made to you in college; only opportunities were extended. The spoiling process you have gone through bought you invaluable time to come to know yourself better under the best

possible situation -- without fear of reprisal for your life style. With a little luck, you have begun to learn to read people, ideas, and situations and to develop a healthy skepticism. You had the means to become sufficiently informed to identify and to value some undeniable truths.

No matter what you studied, you have accumulated both rewarding and difficult experiences through interactions with professors and friends and enemies. The breadth of these experiences, serious and frivolous alike, gave you the opportunity to rethink your values and to reaffirm or revise your goals. To get this far, you have had to make decisions, more often about what was necessary than about what was most gratifying. Undoubtedly, your basic goal is rewarding work worth doing for its own sake. If at times the attainment of this goal seems frustrated, reflect on the process of the past four years by which you grew in wisdom.

If you accept the learning process of your college years as a model for life, you will not turn bitter. Life can be like a canvas on which we paint our judgments. I wish for each of you a masterpiece.

Here, we see the jeremiad in its full form, ending not in despair but in hope. Readers are offered a way of avoiding disaster, in this case through a moral lesson to be learned, which, if learned, can still lead them to ultimate salvation.

A Concluding Evaluation

Without evaluation, a rhetorical critique is incomplete. This is difficult in the use of genre criticism, however, for as mentioned earlier, generic classifications are better conceived as descriptive than as prescriptive. The uniqueness of rhetorical situations makes it risky to infer that a given speech is effective or ineffective merely because it meets or fails to meet the characteristics of a given genre.

Yet as also mentioned earlier, a key proposition of genre criticism is that genres may constrain the rhetorical options of a speaker. As Jamieson puts the point: "When the rhetorical parameters established by the

generic tradition are overstepped, reaction is provoked. One element in the implied contract between rhetor and audience is a clause stipulating that he fulfill rather than frustrate the expectations created for the audience by previous rhetoric generated in response to similar situations."[25] Considering the parameters established by the jeremiad, then, what is the likely effectiveness of the countercommencement address as a rhetorical act?

Unfortunately, this is hard to judge from the addresses discussed here, as audience reactions are hard to assess. An examination of subsequent issues of The Chronicle of Higher Education, for example, reveals no letters-to-the-editor which would indicate readers' reactions to the Daniel address, and the same thing is true of the Neusner address in the National Review. From a newspaper account of this address, however, we do learn that "all hell broke loose" when the piece was published in the Brown University student newspaper. Neusner was reportedly dismayed by the outrage it provoked, most of it in the form of personal insults, and surprised that students were so offended.[26]

He probably should not have been. As we have seen, the nature of the rhetorical situation for the jeremiad may impel the rhetor to offer hope in response to catastrophe, or risk being the object of the people's guilt himself. This is an ever-present possibility in the countercommencement address, where it is easy, perhaps, to see the rhetor (i.e., the faculty member who taught the students) as the proximate cause of the problems he laments. That Neusner's work also violated the expectations of the traditional commencement address, which is itself a genre, of course, may have heightened its negative response.

In comparison, a different response was apparently given to Ochrymowycz's work, a slightly modified version of which actually was delivered as a commencement address before it appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education.[27] Ochrymowycz reports that the address was received quite favorably, resulting in only one really negative letter.[28] The reason is not hard to see. Though similar to Daniel's and Neusner's in the beginning, its conclusion is far more conciliatory, and far more likely, we might speculate, to promote a sense of audience cooperation rather than resentment.

All of this raises a final question as to the motive of addresses such as Daniel's and Neusner's. A variety of motives, of course, are probably in effect: a desire, however poorly articulated, to fulfill the jeremian role as a corrector of audience conduct, a desire to condemn one's colleagues (rather than students), for their "broken covenant" with education,[29] and perhaps a simple desire to disown responsibility for what one sees as the fruits of one's labors. The tone and content of the countercommencement address may strike a sympathetic chord in most faculty members; few, perhaps, have not looked at certain of their students going out into the world and not wondered what will ever become of them, and if their likely failings will not somehow be traced to the teachers who presumably made them what they are.

An interesting, more profound explanation, however, comes from Burke's notion that attitudes can serve as preparation for action, or sometimes as substitutes for action. One may substitute intent for deed by manifesting an appropriate attitude without actually doing anything to implement that attitude. A curious result of the Puritan Jerimiad, says

Johannesen, was that it frequently became a ritual. People could prove themselves dedicated by making humiliation a form of homage, lamentation a form of loyalty. Preaching, reading, and hearing jeremiads substituted formal repentance for actual reform.[30] It may be, then, that the counter-commencement address is a ritual, a way for the rhetor to repent his own sins, instead of doing what would seem more appropriate in the face of calamity -- reforming his own behavior and eliminating the problem.

ENDNOTES

[1] John Steinbeck, "Graduates: These Are Your Lives!" Esquire, 84 (September, 1975), 69, 142-143.
The "address" was actually written in 1956 in a letter to James S. Pope, executive editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, and published after Steinbeck's death.

[2] Russell Baker, "Let a Thousand Etceteras Bloom -- Notes for a Commencement Speech," Phi Delta Kappan, 52 (June, 1971), 641-642.

[3] William Zinsser, "Commencement Address," Life, 64 (May 24, 1968), 27.
Zinsser's "address" is a parody, of sorts, on the campus unrest of the late 1960's, "interrupted" at various points by bombs going off, students rioting in the streets, etc.. It stands as a curiosity today, a "period piece," but it may not have seemed so odd at the time, when according to a public opinion poll ("Youth: The Jeremiads of June," Time, 93 (June 13, 1969), 16-17), some 12.8% of college students identified themselves as political radicals.

[4] Walter R. Fisher, "Genre: Concepts and Applications in Rhetorical Criticism," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 44 (Fall, 1980), 288-299.
Genres, says Fisher, may be constituted on four levels: Most broadly in terms of linguistic forms (poetic, dialectic, rhetoric); more narrowly (within rhetoric) in terms of categories like place, intent, and motives; still more narrowly in terms of situation or occasion (eulogy, apology, convention nominating speech); and most narrowly in terms of style (sentimental, paranoid, jeremiad). It is on the third level, he asserts, that most examples of genre criticism have been done.

[5] Kathleen M. Hall Jamieson, "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6 (Summer, 1973), p. 162.

[6] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (eds.) Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1978, 9-32.
See also Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1965.

[7] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusion of Generic Elements," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 68 (May, 1982), 146-157.

[8] Robert S. Cathcart, Post-Communication: Rhetorical Analysis and Evaluation, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 2nd. Ed., 1981.

[9]Thomas M. Conley, "Ancient Rhetoric and Modern Genre Criticism," Communication Quarterly, 27 (Fall, 1979), 47-53.
See also Campbell and Jamieson, op. cit. The tendency to treat genres as convenient taxonomies, say the authors, may be reflected in the large number of "Rhetoric of" studies (e.g., of women's liberation, black power, civil disobedience) conducted in the early 1970's which use the genre concept without entailing a fully developed claim to generic particularity.

[10]James R. Andrews, The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1983.

[11]Kathleen M. Jamieson, "Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraints," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61 (December, 1975), 406-415.

[12]Andrews, op. cit., p. 59.

[13]Richard L. Johannesen, "The Jeremiad and Jenkin Lloyd Jones," Communication Monographs, 52 (June, 1985), p. 158.

[14]Ibid., p. 159.

[15]Ernest G. Bormann, "Fetching Good Out of Evil: A Rhetorical Use of Calamity," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63 (April, 1977), 130-139.

[16]Cathcart, op. cit., pp. 87-88.

[17]Johannesen, op. cit.
For an interesting and more complete discussion of such values, see also Edward D. Steele, and W. Charles Redding, "The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 26 (Spring, 1962), 83-91.

[18]Ronald H. Carpenter, "The Historical Jeremiad as Rhetorical Genre," Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action, op. cit., p. 104.

[19]Ibid.
See also Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 51 (April, 1970), p. 113.

[20]Johannesen, op. cit., p. 161.

[21]Carter A. Daniel, "Notes for a Dissenting Commencement Address," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 18 (May 7, 1979), 56.

[22]Including the Seattle Post-Intelligencer of June 7, 1981, B8, where it appeared under the title: "So you learned about college, now learn about the real world".

[23]Jacob Neusner, "Commencement Address," National Review, 33 (June 12, 1981), 650,652.

[24]Leo Ochrymowycz, "An Open Letter to the Class of 1987," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 33 (May 20, 1987), 84.

[25]Jamieson, "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," op. cit., p. 167.

[26]Seattle Post-Intelligencer, op. cit.

Neusner claimed that he wrote the piece in 15 minutes and doubted that anyone would pay any attention to it. However, first came the outpouring of student vehemence and then the media spotlight. The piece was run in newspapers around the country and picked up by the Associated Press wire service.

[27]Specifically, under the title: "Day 1, And Counting" to the Summer, 1986, graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, where Ochrymowycz is a professor of chemistry.

[28]Personal communication with Leo Ochrymowycz, September 28, 1987.

The letter came from a graduate student who felt the address was "demeaning" to students. On the other hand, he reports receiving another letter from three students (whom he did not know) who felt the address was "the best they had ever heard".

[29]According to the Seattle P-I, op. cit., this seems to have been Neusner's real intent. Students, he claimed, missed the point of his address; it was actually meant for his fellow professors. "I was thinking we faculty have been getting pretty sloppy with the students," he says. "I meant the piece as an attack on faculty complacency." If so, we might question his choice of media, i.e., why he chose to publish the piece in the student newspaper instead of as, say, an open letter to the faculty.

[30]Johannesen, op. cit.